Examining the value of place-names as evidence for the history, landscape and languages of the North Norfolk coast

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Introduction

The corpus examined in this study consists of forty parish names (see Appendix A) that form a line along the North Norfolk coast as shown by the highlighted section of the map in figure 1. This analysis will demonstrate that place-names are an extremely valuable resource that provide an insight into the linguistic and topographical history of an area.

Firstly, I will concentrate on the place-names as evidence of the languages of my chosen area. The county of Norfolk falls wholly within the Danelaw that was established in the late 9th century (Gelling 2010). This indicates that the place-names are likely to reflect some degree of Scandinavian influence.

Language

The corpus does exhibit some evidence of Old Norse (ON) as expected. The ON element *thorp* occurs three times in Baconsthorpe, Cockthorpe and Burnham Thorpe and ON *fjǫl* in Felbrigg. The first two examples are also recorded as the simplex name *Torp* in 1086, which highlights that place-names made entirely of ON did occur in this area of Norfolk. The element *thorp* is also valuable for indicating who settled in this area as Cameron (1996) suggests it is indicative of Danish settlement specifically (79). This is in keeping with the widely acknowledged fact that the 'Danes originally established the Kingdom of East Anglia in the 6th Century' (Bridgwater 1995: 17-18). Besides the examples already listed, there are no other ON elements in the corpus. This suggests there was some Viking settlement in this area, but it was unlikely to have been dense. This conclusion is supported by
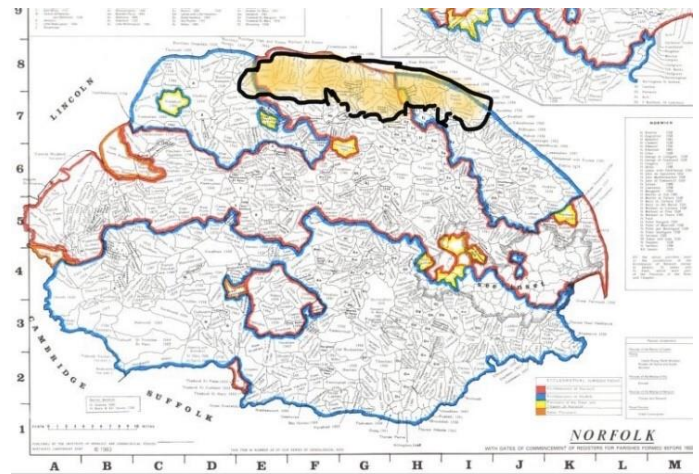

Figure 1: Area covered in corpus
<https://s3.amazonaws.com/photos.geni.com/p13/63/4dd9/76/5344483e4bac5961/norfolk-parishes_original.jpg>
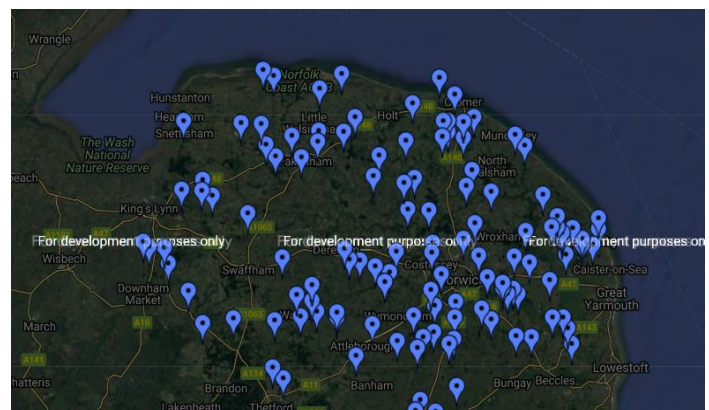[Accessed 27 Dec 2019]

Figure 2: Distribution of ON in Norfolk
Halogen: Key to English Place-names.
https://halogen.le.ac.uk/results/results.php?county%5B%5D=NFK&lang%5B%5D=AGGON&hword_list%5B%5D=all&placename=&placename_match_type=exact&data_set=kepn
[Accessed 28 Dec 2019]

Cameron's (1996) finding that Viking settlement in Norfolk was restricted to certain areas with few settlers (77). This can be further illustrated through figure 2, which shows the distribution of ON found in place-names throughout the county. If the presence of ON is taken as roughly indicative of settlement areas, it suggests Vikings settled in sporadic fashion, particularly when concentrating on the coastline where my corpus is taken from.

Despite the limited ON influence on the corpus, there is still evidence that Viking and Anglo-Saxon communities lived alongside each other. This comes in the form of hybrids, such as Felbrigg (ON *fjǫl* + OE *brycg*). Hybrid place-names suggest that people from different language backgrounds were living and working in proximity, which gave rise to a place-name formed from both languages that were being spoken. The corpus also contains one potential example of a Grimston hybrid, if Runton is interpreted as 'farmstead of a man called **Rùnǐ*'. Insley (1994) suggests in Norfolk Scandinavian personal names often occur in areas without large-scale place-name evidence for Scandinavian settlement (xxxviii). This supports the interpretation of Runton deriving from the Scandinavian **Rùni* rather than OE *Rūna*, as it has just been noted there is only minor evidence of Scandinavian settlement in the corpus. Therefore, this could be evidence of a Scandinavian individual in a position of power, providing further evidence of Viking integration into the community. However, it cannot be certain that Runton is a Grimston hybrid.

The majority of the place-names found in the corpus are of OE origin. There are three examples of simplex names: Cley, Holt and Wells. However, most are compounds consisting of either two OE elements, such as Roughton and Cromer or an OE personal name plus an OE element, such as Binham. The corpus provides some evidence of OE grammar in the early spellings of Bodham (*Bodenham* 1086) and Wiveton (*Wiuentona* 1086). Both early forms display weak -*en* genitive endings of the OE personal names *Boda* and **Wīfe*. The over-whelming evidence of OE found in the corpus is to be expected and is the case all over the country.

There are other minor linguistic influences seen in the corpus. Indication of pre-English presence in the area is limited to just one place-name, Trunch 'wood on an upland or plateau', which consists of two Celtic elements **trüm* + **cę̄d.* However, Ekwall (1960) suggests that it might be transferred from *Le Tronchet*, the name of an Abbey in Ille-et-Vilaine in France which had possessions in Norfolk (481). Figure 3 provides support for the Celtic origin of this name as the contour lines appear to suggest Trunch sits on higher ground than parishes around it. If this name is taken as Celtic it indicates some degree of survival of the Celtic speaking population after the Anglo-Saxon arrival in the area. The amount of Celtic influence is minimal in areas outside of the North and West of England, so even having this one name preserved is significant (Gelling 2010: 92).
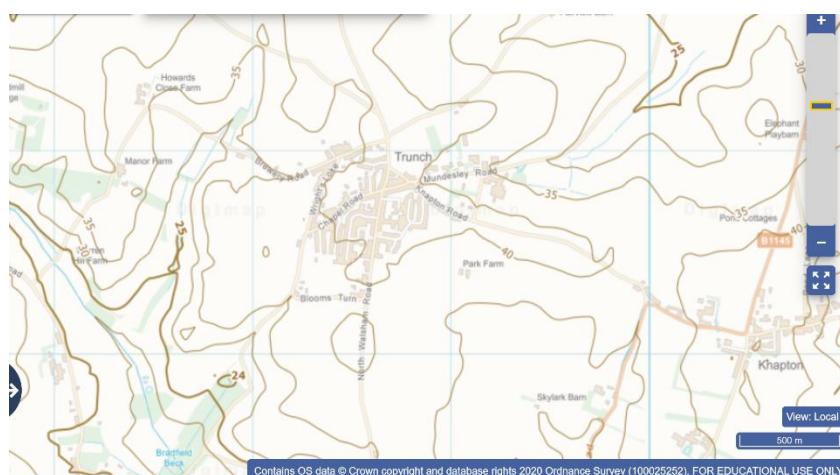

Figure 3: OS Digimap of Trunch [Accessed 12 Jan 2020]

A later linguistic influence on the corpus is from Norman French. This is seen in the Norman family surnames *Bacon* (Baconsthorpe) and *Co(c)ke* (Cockthorpe) added to the ON element

thorp to rename original settlements after the Norman conquest. This indicates the presence of Norman aristocracy in the area. The affix in Cockthorpe has been explained as OE *cocc* 'where cocks are reared'. However, the affix is first recorded in the 13th century (*Coketorp* 1254) which indicates it is more likely to be manorial. Richard Jones (2012a) comments that it is common to find a brief time lapse between family attachment to a parish and place-name recognition (261). Therefore, the affixes do not necessarily mean the Norman families were living there at the time the place-names were recorded. The common nature of *thorp* that the family names are attached to also hints at increasing post-Conquest bureaucratic administration, which saw the need to differentiate places from each other. Manorial affixes were clearly a way of doing this in my chosen area.

Place-names also give an insight into how language changes over time. The 1086 forms of Northrepps and Southrepps were *Norrepes* and *Sutrepes*, which changed to *Nordrepples* (1185) and *Sutrepples* (1210) respectively. This is an example of epenthesis, where consonants (*d* in Nordepples and *l* in both) have been added into the previous forms of the place-names. These changes were made most likely for ease of articulation. However, over time the *l* that was added is lost again to create the modern forms of the place-names. Ekwall (1960) suggests the loss of this consonant might be due to Norman influence, which as discussed above did impact the area (385). Other types of sound change are evidenced in the corpus, such as metathesis seen in the transposition of the *r* in *Brunhamtorp* (1199) to Burnham Thorpe. There are also some names which remain recognisable or in fact the exact same as the original form, as seen in Langham.

Groups, Individuals and Community

Manorial affixes are not the only evidence in the corpus that provide us an insight into who was living where on the North Norfolk coast. The corpus features four examples of *-inga* + *hām* names: Gimingham, Sheringham, Saxlingham and Trimingham. These names are interpreted as the homestead or site of the followers of the individual highlighted in the name. For example, Sheringham means 'homestead of the followers of *Scīra*'. Letheringsett also has a similar meaning of 'dwelling of the family or followers of a man called *Lēodhere*'. All these place-names suggest that the community in coastal Norfolk was organised into different groups with certain individuals taking up positions of leadership. However, why those individuals were in those positions is beyond the scope of what the place-names tell us.

Kelling is the only example of an *-ingas* name found in the corpus. This supports the accepted trend that generally *-inga* + *hām* names are more numerous than *-ingas* names in East Anglia (Ekwall 1962: 160). These place-names are valuable for commenting on the chronology of settlement in the area. There is much debate in place-name scholarship over whether *-ingas* and *-inga* + *hām* names pinpoint the earliest phase of Anglo-Saxon settlement. Martin J. Ryan (2011) suggests *-ingas* names belong to the 6th century and later, whereas *-inga* + *hām* names are earlier than this (9). However, Kelling has one of the earliest attestation dates in the corpus of c.970, whilst Trimingham has one of the latest (1185). This would suggest the reverse chronology of *-ingas* and *-inga* + *hām* names proposed by Ryan. However, the first attestation dates of the place-names do not necessarily confirm that Kelling was an earlier settlement than Trimingham. Place-names existed orally before being written down and its likely Trimingham existed earlier than its first recorded date. Settlement chronology in the corpus can also be constructed through compounds ending with the habitative generics *-tūn* and *-hām*. These are common in the corpus, with examples found such as Wighton, Morston, Gresham and Bodham. Names in *hām* have been placed as earlier settlements compared to names in *tūn* through the findings

of earlier archaeological evidence that dates from 450 to 720 in the East Anglian *hāms* (Jones 2013: 194).

The place-names also preserve evidence of individuals from the area through personal names. Most of these are male monothematic names, such as *Becca* (Beckham) and *Bæga* (Bayfield). There are three examples of dithematic names, which are *Æthelmǣr* (Aylmerton), *Lēodhere* (Letheringsett) and *Seaxhelm* (Saxlingham). Kitson (2002) suggests dithematic names are suggestive of the later Anglo-Saxon period (96). This explains why most of the place-names preserve monothematic names as place-names generally belong to the early Anglo-Saxon period. The corpus also provides seven examples of personal names not attested outside of place-name studies, which exemplifies how place-names can be valuable for multiple disciplines.

There is one personal name in the corpus which is potentially female. This is **Wīfe* which is preserved in Wiveton in its genitive form. However, there is an alternative explanation that opposed to referencing just one individual woman, it may be referencing women more generally from the genitive plural of OE *wīf* ('farmstead of the women'). Carole Hough (2013) found that women seem to feature in place-names more as individuals rather than groups (280-281). This would support the interpretation which includes the female personal name, but we cannot be certain this is correct. Either way, both options reflect the involvement of women in the area as leaders and/or as workers.

The place-names also provide evidence of active administration happening within communities. For example, Glandford suggests an organised meeting point was created for revelry at a river crossing, which was likely a well-known landmark in the area due to the importance of river crossings in this period. There is still a ford in Glandford on the River Glaven which is potentially what the settlement was named from (fig. 4). River crossings were often used as meeting points, and the crossing in Glandford could have been a multi-purpose site that was used for general meetings as well as revelry (Gelling 2010: 212). The corpus also exemplifies administration activity that is likely the result of bureaucratic needs. Later affixes have been added to a few of the names, such as in Beeston Regis. The affix *Regis* is medieval Latin for 'of the king'. This must have been added after 1476 when the land is known to have been held by the crown (Sandred 2002: 9). It is unsure exactly when this affix was first added to the name, but its attachment clearly conveys the royal presence in the area. Additionally, the affixes East and West have been added to the settlement name

Figure 4: Ford across the River Glaven in Glandford
<https://s0.geograph.org.uk/photos/50/49/504993_70d495a6.jpg> [Accessed 13 Jan 2020]

Beckham in 1269 and 1324 respectively (Sandred 2002: 8, 59). This indicates the initial settlement was split into two and then named in relation to each other to differentiate the new parishes. Jones claims that the compass points were part of an ordering system used by the elite and educated (2012b: 209). This means the later affixes were likely acts of administration coming from an elite central coordination. Therefore, the corpus provides us with two different types of administration, one coming from the needs of the community seen in Glandford and the other coming from post-conquest, bureaucratic authorities.

Landscape

The place-names in the corpus can also provide an insight into what the area used to look like. Some of the features referenced in the place-names have since disappeared from the landscape. For example, the lake referenced in Cromer (OE *mere* 'lake'). Gelling and Cole (2000) widen out the definition of the generic *mere* to a body of water which is not part of a larger water feature (21-22). This means the term could have applied to any sized body of standing water from extensive lakes to small ponds. On a modern map of Cromer (fig. 5), a small body of water is still visible. However, this is situated as part of a zoo and is likely to be a recently installed man-made body of water. Therefore, this is unlikely to be what the original settlement was named from. Despite this, Gelling and Cole's explanation of *mere* is still likely to apply in this area due to its position on the coastline, where it would be logical to signal that water features are separate from the wider sea.

Figure 5: OS Digimap of Cromer [Accessed 29 Dec 2019]

Some features referenced in the place-names can still be pinpointed in the current landscape. Overstrand 'narrow shore' and Sidestrand 'broad shore' are examples of this. The difference in the size of the shore seen on the map (fig. 6) is subtle but does appear narrower near Overstrand than Sidestrand. The size of the shore would have been important in terms of defending the villages from the sea, which might explain why these place-names were coined. The weir identified in Warham can also still be seen on a map of the parish, along the River Stiffkey. This weir was likely extremely important as the area between Stiffkey and Great Walsingham (which Warham is in the middle of) is liable to severe flooding, as seen in figure 7 (Environment Agency 2009). Flooding in Warham must have been common in the Anglo-Saxon period too for the village to take its name from the weir. Flooding was perhaps a concern for the people doing the place-naming in Weybourne too. The generic OE *burna* likely refers to Spring Beck which runs through the village today. This stream is also prone to
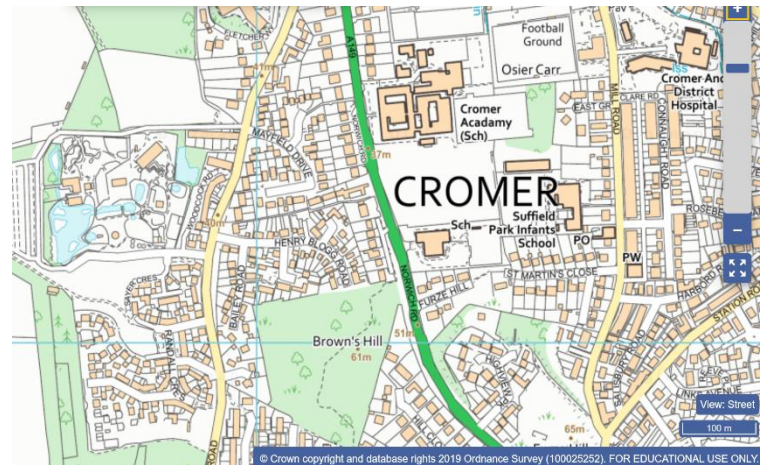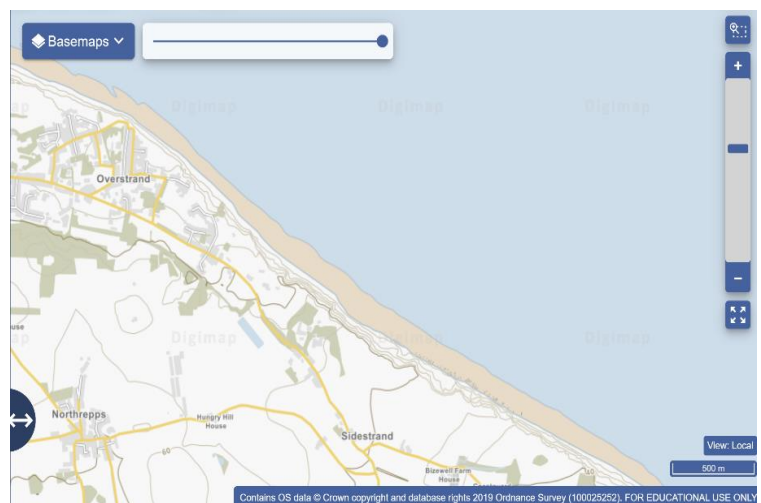

Figure 6: OS Digimap of the shoreline at Overstrand & Sidestrand [Accessed 29 Dec 2019]

Figure 7: River Stiffkey flooded
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/RiverStiffkeyFordNearGreatWalsingham%28DavidWilliams%29Sep2004.jpg> [Accessed 31 Dec 2019]

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flooding after heavy rainfall. This suggests that the first element of this name might be OE *wær* 'weir, river dam'. However, a weir is not identifiable on the current or historical maps of Weybourne, so this explanation is not certain.

Place-names can also give us clues as to what the soil quality of an area is like. There are three place-names which give indication of marshy land that fall in a line along the North Norfolk coast: Blakeney, Stiffkey and Morston. The two occurrences of the generic element *ēg* 'dry ground in marsh' indicates that the land was consistently marshy in this area as the patches of dry ground became a differentiating factor from surrounding parishes. Its marshy nature is still observable today in the vast saltmarshes that stretch along the North Norfolk coast (fig. 8). The corpus also reveals the value of these marshes to those doing the naming in this area. The place-name Salthouse tells us that the salt from the marshes was being harnessed for use. This would most likely be for the purpose of food preservation which was extremely important in the medieval period. This also supports Gelling and Cole's (2000) interpretation that compounds with OE *mersc + tūn* (Morston) indicate that the area was economically dependent on the marsh (57). Additional information we can gather from the place-names on soil quality comes from Cley 'place with clayey soil', which is still true of the area today as seen in figure 9, where clay soil (indicated by the colour yellow) surrounds the parish. Naming the parish after the clay soil may well indicate that the nutrients available from it were important to the people living there for growing crops to sustain themselves. The full parish name, Cley-next-the-sea also indicates landscape change as the parish no longer lies directly next to the sea due to land reclamation.

Figure 8: Saltmarshes at Cley and Salthouse
<https://www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk/getmedia/25cb7697-d428-4138-87ea-ffa39601be28/Cley-Marshes-Mike-Page.jpg.aspx?width=500> [Accessed 31 Dec 2019]
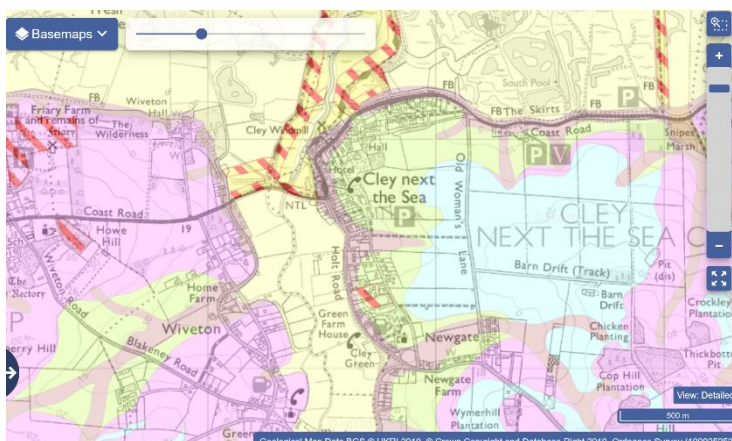

Figure 9: OS Digimap of clay soil surrounding Cley [Accessed 29 Dec 2019]

The corpus contains very few references to hills or valleys. Norfolk has a flat landscape, so this was expected. There are two place-names which refer to slight undulations in the land. Trunch has already been discussed earlier in the essay. The other is Holkham, which suggests the presence of a hollow or depression. This does appear to be true of the place even now as the contour lines in figure 10 illustrate that Holkham is situated on lower ground to the surrounding areas.

There are a few further hints at how the landscape was used by its inhabitants found in the corpus. Hempstead implies the crop Hemp was being purposefully grown there. This could have been for textile production which is what it was commonly used for in the medieval period. In addition, thorn trees were also being grown in Thornage (OE *thorn + edisc*).

Gelling and Cole (2000) define *edisc* as being suggestive of man-made enclosures (269). Therefore, it seems more likely that this indicates cultivated rather than wild thorn trees. There is some evidence of naturally occurring vegetation found in Beeston 'farmstead where bent-grass grows' and Gresham 'grass homestead or enclosure'. In terms of wildlife the corpus only indicates the presence of crows in Cromer (OE *crāwe*). Cockthorpe potentially suggests that cocks were being reared there but as suggested earlier this is more likely to be a manorial affix. The absence of animal husbandry in this rural farming county, may indicate that this was common all over and could not be used as a distinguishing factor for individual places.

Figure 10: OS Digimap of Holkham [Accessed 29 Dec 2019]

This study has attempted to show the wealth of information that can be gained from examining place-names. It shows that even from a small group of names (such as was studied here) you can learn a vast amount of information about an area's linguistic, societal and landscape history. Place-names do not always provide definitive answers on all these issues, but they often give rise to information that would otherwise have remained obscured.

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Appendix A

All entries taken from A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names* (2011), unless otherwise indicated.

Aylmerton Norfolk. *Almartune* 1086 (DB). 'Farmstead or village of a man called Æthelmǣr'. OE pers. name + *tūn*.

Baconsthorpe Norfolk. *Torp, Baconstorp* 1086 (DB). 'Outlying farmstead or hamlet of a family called Bacon'. Norman surname + ON *thorp*.

Beckham, East/West Norfolk. *Beccheham* 1086 (DB), *Estbekam* 1269, *Westbekham* 1324. 'Homestead or village of a man called Becca'. OE pers. name + *hām*.

Beeston Regis Norfolk. *Besetune* 1086 (DB). Usually 'farmstead where bent-grass grows'. Affix is Latin regis 'of the king'. Held by the crown from 1476 (indicated by later affix). OE **bēos* + *tūn*.

Binham Norfolk. *Binneham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead or enclosure of a man called Bynna'. OE pers. name + *hām* or *hamm*.

Blakeney Norfolk. *Blakenye* 1242. 'Dark-coloured island or dry ground in marsh'. OE *blæc* (dative *blacan*) + *ēg*.

Bodham Norfolk. *Bod(en)ham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead or enclosure of a man called Boda'. OE pers. name (genitive *-n*) + *hām* or *hamm*.

Burnham Thorpe Norfolk. *Brunhamtorp* 1199. Usually 'homestead or village on a stream'. OE *burna* + *hām*. Affix is 'outlying farmstead', ON *thorp*.

Cley-next-the-sea Norfolk. *Claia* 1086 (DB). OE *clæg* 'clay, place with clayey soil'.

Cockthorpe Norfolk. *Torp* 1086 (DB), *Coketorp* 1254. Originally ON *thorp* 'secondary settlement, outlying farmstead' + affix which may be manorial from a family called *Co(c)ke*. Or may indicate 'where cocks are reared' from OE *cocc*.

Cromer Norfolk. *Crowemere* 13th century. 'Lake frequented by crows'. OE *crāwe* + *mere*.

Felbrigg Norfolk. *Felebruge* 1086 (DB). 'Bridge made of planks'. ON *fjǫl* + OE *brycg*.

Gimingham Norfolk. *Gimingeham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead of the family or followers of a man called **Gymi* or **Gymma*'. OE pers. name + *-inga-* + *hām*.

Glandford with Bayfield Norfolk. *Glamforda* 1086 (DB). Probably 'ford where people assemble for revelry or games'. OE *glēam* + *ford*. *Baiafelda* 1086 (DB). 'Bæga's open-land'. OE pers. name + *feld*.

Gresham Norfolk. *Gressam* 1086 (DB). 'Grass homestead or enclosure'. OE *græs* + *hām* or *hamm*.

Hempstead Norfolk, near Holt. *Henepsteda* 1086 (DB). 'Place where hemp is grown'. OE *hænep* + *stede*.

Holkham Norfolk. *Holcham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead in or near a hollow'. OE *holc* + *hām*.

Holt Norfolk. *Holt 1086* (DB). A common name, '(place at) the wood or thicket', OE *holt.*

Kelling Norfolk. *Chillinge c.*970, *Kellinga* 1086 (DB). '(Settlement of) the family or followers of a man called **Cylla* or Ceolla'. OE pers. name + *-ingas*.

Langham Norfolk. *Langham* 1047–70, 1086 (DB). Usually 'long homestead or enclosure. OE *lang* + *hām* or *hamm*.

Letheringsett Norfolk. *Leringaseta* 1086 (DB). Probably 'dwelling or fold of the family or followers of a man called Lēodhere'. OE pers. name + *-inga-* + (*ge*)*set*.

Morston Norfolk. *Merstona* 1086 (DB). 'Farmstead by a marsh'. OE *mersc* + *tūn*.

Northrepps Norfolk. *Norrepes* 1086 (DB), *Nordrepples* 1185. Probably 'north strips of land'. OE *north* + **reopul*.

Overstrand Norfolk. *Othestranda* [*sic*] 1086 (DB), *Overstrand* 1231. 'Shore with an edge or margin', probably 'narrow shore'. OE *ōfer* + *strand*.

Roughton Norfolk. *Rugutune* 1086 (DB), *Ruhton* 1202. 'Farmstead on rough ground', OE *rūh* 'rough' (here used as a noun) + *tūn*.

Runton Norfolk. *Runetune* 1086 (DB). 'Farmstead of a man called *Rūna or *Rúni'. OE or ON pers. name + OE *tūn*.

Salthouse Norfolk. *Salthus* 1086 (DB). 'Building for storing salt'. OE *salt* + *hūs*.

Saxlingham Norfolk. *Saxelingaham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead of the family or followers of a man called *Seaxel or Seaxhelm', OE pers. name + *-inga-* + *hām*.

Sheringham Norfolk. *Silingeham* [*sic*] 1086 (DB), *Scheringham* 1242. 'Homestead of the family or followers of a man called Scīra'. OE pers. name + *-inga-* + *hām*.

Sidestrand Norfolk. *Sistran* [*sic*] 1086 (DB), *Sidestrande* late 12th cent. 'Broad shore'. OE *sīd* + *strand*.

Southrepps Norfolk. *Sutrepes* 1086 (DB), *Sutrepples* 1209. Probably 'south strips of land'. OE *sūth* + **reopul*.

Stiffkey Norfolk. *Stiuekai* 1086 (DB). 'Island, or dry ground in marsh, with tree-stumps'. OE **styfic* + *ēg*.

Thornage Norfolk. *Tornedis* 1086 (DB). 'Thorn-tree enclosure or pasture'. OE *thorn* + *edisc*.

Trimingham Norfolk. *Trimingeham* 1185. 'Homestead of the family or followers of a man called *Trymma'. OE pers. name + *-inga-* + *hām*.

Trunch Norfolk. *Trunchet* 1086 (DB). Probably 'wood on an upland or plateau'. Celtic **trŭm* + **cę̄d*. Alternatively, a name transferred from France, *Le Tronchet* in Ille-et-Vilaine (Ekwall).

Warham Norfolk. *Warham* 1086 (DB). 'Homestead or village by a weir'. OE *wær* + *hām*.

Wells-next-the-Sea Norfolk. *Guelle* [*sic*] 1086 (DB), *Wellis* 1291. 'the springs', OE *wella* in a plural form.

Weybourne Norfolk. *Wabrune* 1086 (DB). OE *burna* 'spring, stream' with an uncertain first element, possibly an OE or pre-English name of the river from a root **war-* 'water', or an OE **wagu* 'quagmire', or OE *wær* 'weir, river-dam'. Alternatively, from OE *wearg-burna* 'felon-stream' (Ekwall).

Wighton Norfolk. *Wistune* 1086 (DB). 'Dwelling place, farmstead with a dwelling'. OE *wīc-tūn*.

Wiveton Norfolk. *Wiuetuna, Wiuentona* 1086 (DB), *Wyveton* 1226. 'Farmstead or village of a woman called *Wīfe'. OE pers. name (genitive *-n*) + *tūn*. Alternatively, perhaps 'farmstead of the women', from genitive plural *wīfa* of OE *wīf*.